

# A Brief History of the YMCA Aquatic Center

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The YMCA Aquatic Center (previously known as the Justus Aquatic Center) opened its doors in January of 1985 as a daring business venture combining a hotel with a sporting venue. The first aquatic, fitness and hotel complex, the Justus Aquatic Center was the largest indoor competitive swimming facility in the southeast with a 50 meter by 25 yard natatorium and a separate 25 meter by 25 yard diving well. It featured a first of its kind hydraulically retractable roof. It also featured a workout/ wellness center, gymnastics center, and racquetball courts.

A very fast pool it was the site of many national and international competitions. Numerous world and American records have been set over the years at the facility and the record breakers read like a who's who in swimming, Michael Phelps, Janet Evans, Matt Biondi, Dara Torres and scores of others.

Sadly, financial problems plagued the center from the beginning. Partially due to poor business planning (the member check in was located in the wellness center in the back of the facility. This was convenient for the hotel guests but not the main parking entrance. Many used the facility without memberships because there were no controls on the entrances). That coupled with some questionable accounting practices, resulted in poor cash flow and a rapid exodus of many of the original staff.

In the late '80s there was a brief closure of the facility as the Great Western Bank took the facility over in receivership. A renaming of the facility occurred from the Justus Aquatic Center to the Orlando International Aquatic and Fitness Center. Reorganization of the facility began with renaming all of the aquatics teams TEAM ORLANDO. Management was taken over by the troubled Mission Bay Aquatics group and even with a new addition of a 25 yard indoor teaching pool the center continued to struggle financially. Valiant efforts by managers Fred Cruciger and later Clay Smith attempted to keep the center solvent. Unfortunately in January of 1992, citing an operating loss of \$600,000 a year and the impossibility of running an aquatics facility of that size in the black, without warning the bank chained the doors and closed the center. Plans were made for the destruction of the Aquatic Center in order to make for a larger parking lot.

A chance meeting at the chained doors with Harris Rosen, a local hotelier, and a teary-eyed Special Olympic Athlete was to change the planned future for the Aquatic Center. The Special Olympian asked Mr. Rosen if they had done something wrong to make them close the pool. Mr. Rosen assured him that they had not. Then he asked Mr. Rosen if he could get them to reopen the pool and Mr. Rosen promised he would. That promise began a six-month community battle to reopen the Aquatic Center.

Harris Rosen formed a group called the Friends of the Aquatic Center. With a core group of aquatics activists such as Dr. Lucky Meisenheimer, Scott Henderson, Julie Sundstrom and others, they rallied the community in support of reopening the center. However, even with the support of Bill Buchalter, sports columnist for the Orlando Sentinel, many local politicians initially sided with the bank. Chairman of the Orange County Commission initially reminded Aquatic Center supporters that the bank was an important community member as well. In the mistaken belief that the supporters would rapidly lose steam some local politicians remained mute.

As the months went by support for reopening the Aquatic Center, only continued to grow. Protest marches were organized. Meetings were held with congressmen Jim Bacchus and Bill McCollum. Radio shows devoted time to rally support for the center. Local businesses placed signs in their windows in support of the center. Clients began withdrawing deposits from the bank not only locally but in other areas of the country as well. Harris Rosen was relentless in pursuit of fulfilling his promise. Finally local politicians did an about face and began working for a solution to the problem.

In a deal with the bank, which allowed for financial incentives for increased hotel room density at the site, the bank agreed to separate the hotel from the Aquatic Center and donate the facility to the county. The county did not want to be responsible for the operations of the Aquatic Center so an offer was made to the Central Florida YMCA to add the Aquatic Center to its growing list of YMCAs. The offer was met with resistance from many in the YMCA, as the shadow of the financial losses still lingered in many peoples minds. Harris Rosen once again entered the picture and with a handshake guarantee offered his support to the YMCA to get the center reopened. Jerry Haralson the CEO of the Central Florida YMCA, in a leap of faith, agreed to make the Aquatic Center a member of the Central Florida YMCA community.

In June of 1992 the facility was reopened as the YMCA Aquatic Center to much fanfare and political speeches. Interestingly the man most responsible for the reopening of the center did not give a speech he just smiled as he took the first lap in the pool.

Many of the leaders in the Friends of the Aquatic Center became some of the first board members. Charlie Stuart a long time supporter of the Central Florida YMCA became the first chairman of the YMCA Aquatic Center's Board of

Directors and Richard Robinson was named the first executive Director of the YMCA Aquatic Center.

Jim Ferber the new CEO of the Central Florida YMCA had a vision for a partnership with Florida Hospital that resulted in a restructuring of the facility with a state of the art physical therapy and rehabilitation center being added in the front of the facility. Under the direction of the new executive director Jim Purdy the massive remodeling project was completed.

The Aquatic Center began to flourish and in the mid 90s John Vasbinder took over as the executive director of the YMCA Aquatic Center and for the first time the center began to run in the black. From a facility that had an annual deficit of \$600,000 and burdened with a false belief that it could never be run in the black, it had now become more than a neighborhood YMCA but a center of aquatic excellence that pulled memberships from the entire region. Further improvements to the center were made during this period with remodeling of locker rooms, resurfacing of the pools and decks, and creation of air-conditioned viewing areas for swimming lessons.

With the opportunity provided by the YMCA all the aquatics teams continued to thrive. Team Orlando Diving and Olympic Coach Jay Lerew produced the Aquatic Center's first Olympian with Mark Ruiz. Other teams also continue to have great successes due to long-term commitments from coaches such as Mary Rose (Synchronized Swimming), Bruce Follensbee (Dr. Philips High School Swimming), Lucky Meisenheimer and Larry Peck (Special Olympics and Masters Swimming) all of who have been coaching and volunteering at the aquatic center for two decades.

The YMCA Aquatic Center continues to be an important competitive venue not only locally but nationally as well. The list of the meets and competitions that have been held at the YMCA Aquatic Center is long. Some of the more notable include: USS National Swimming Championships, United States Masters National Championships, NCAA Division III Championships, All Star Diving Championships, U.S Open Synchronized Swimming Championships, Junior National Swimming Championships, YMCA National Championships, Florida State Championships, State Special Olympics Championships, Inner City Games, the Black Heritage Meet and scores of others.

The future of the YMCA Aquatic Center is very exciting. Former world swimming champion Mel Nash is now the head coach of Swim Orlando YMCA and the YMCA Aquatic Center is under the direction of Steve Corrie as the executive director. A new state of the art \$150,000 scoreboard and timing system was added in 2008. A major capital improvements campaign is now being initiated which will allow the Aquatic Center to continue to grow and serve the Central Florida area even better in the future.